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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the effects of the use of role playing in foreign language instruction by applying this instructional method in two elementary Chinese courses at Memphis State University during the 1991-92 academic year. Role playing was used in daily classroom activities and in midterm and final oral examinations. The results of this technique were compared with a more conventional instructional method used with the same courses in the 1990-91 academic year. It was found that role playing encouraged: (1) most students to actively participate in class; (2) students to spend more time outside of class practicing both individually and in groups to prepare for presentations; (3) vocabulary, grammar, and phonetic skills; (4) students to continue to study Chinese; (5) students' creativity; and (6) relationships among students by providing them with opportunities to work together. A survey found that 11 of the 12 students enrolled in the second-semester role playing Chinese course liked role playing as both a learning and examination approach. (Contains 8 references.) (MDM)

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ED 369 289

Role Playing in Foreign Language Teaching: An Application in an Elementary Chinese Class

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It has been recognized that meaningful learning requires a suitable learning environment and students' active participation. In many cases, an assumed real life situation is helpful for the active learning to occur. Role playing, as a model of cooperative learning, has approved effective in realizing these educational goals, especially in foreign language learning (Curtain,1991; Stock, 1990).

The most significant feature of role playing is that it creates a real life setting, which is always desirable in learning a foreign language (Nakajima, 1992; O'Donnell & Shaver, 1990). With role playing, the learners assume that they were in a life setting where the target language was spoken and the related culture was exposed, and they were acting just like people in that culture.

A second feature of role playing is that it involves students' active participation. (Joyce & Weil, 1986; Kunze, 1991; Shaftel & Shaftel, 1967). A key requirement of role playing is that all students be actively involved.

A third feature of role playing is that it motivates students to learn. It enhances self-esteem by showing students they can express themselves in realistic communicative activities, and inhibits students less than non-simulated situations (Stock, 1990).

These features, along with other effects of role playing, were evidenced in the Elementary Chinese classroom at Memphis State University.

Procedures

Role playing was applied in two progressive Elementary Chinese courses at Memphis State University: Chinese 1101 in Fall 1991 and Chinese 1102 in Spring 1992. The intact classes were composed of roughly equal numbers of male and female undergraduate students: 13 in Chinese 1101, and 12 in Chinese 1102. Role playing was adopted as daily classroom activities and as mid-term and final oral examinations.

In the daily language class, the typical learning process went through six steps:

Step one: Warm up the group. The instructor identified or introduced new topics, such as visiting a friend, seeing a doctor, or talking about Chinese music.

Step two: Study the subject matters. The instructor taught vocabulary, grammar, and led the students in practicing the conversations, with special emphasis on pronunciation and intonation. At the same time, cultural differences were explored. For example, in dealing with the topic of visiting a friend, the way the Chinese hosts showed their hospitality and the peculiar politeness of the visitors were experienced.

Step three: Design and rehearse. Students broke into small groups, about three students in each. Each group identified roles, designed the play and rehearsed for about 10 minutes. In order to have a good presentation, very often groups asked for more time to prepare. Their requests for extra time might appear to be extrinsically motivated (they want good grades), but much of the

language was acquired at this stage, and the learning took on a very active feature. Therefore, if possible, more time was given for the rehearsal.

Step four: Prepare the observers. while one group was going to act, others were to be observers. The instructor identified the tasks of the observers, such as looking out for strong and weak points in conversational design, use of language, cultural presentation, and so on.

Step five: Enact. This was the most exciting phase in the process. Group by group, students acted out what they called skits or plays. They tried to speak and act like the Chinese. Great creativity was initialized in making the plays and in acting manners. When something special was presented or a funny error occurred, there was laughter in the classroom: The learning activity appeared to be enjoyable.

This step was not only exciting, it was a great motivation as well for future practice. The warm hand claps of the observers was a very encouraging reward, and the successful performance manifested the capability of the students in using the Chinese language in the real situation.

Step six: Discuss and evaluate. Observers reported what they found, participants spoke on their feelings, and the instructor made his comments and suggested areas for improvement. However, since the rehearsal and enacting steps were likely to take more time, the discussion and evaluation were usually brief.

When role playing was applied as mid-term and final oral examinations, the procedures got started about one month before the

presentation. The major difference was that for oral exams, students had much longer time to design and practice their plays. Consequently the presentations turned out to be more comprehensive and creative.

Very often, in order to polish or enrich a skit, students consulted the instructor or checked the dictionary for Chinese terms that had not been introduced in the classroom.

Time for group preparation in class was limited, and students spent much time out of class to design and practice their plays. Therefore, the long period of the rehearsal step became an active learning process. Actually, this seemed to be the most important step in the process, for much learning occurred at this step and the success of a play largely depended on the preparation.

Findings

The following were the major findings from role playing applied in the Elementary Chinese courses compared with the more conventional approach of individual practice adopted in the same courses in the previous academic year (1990-1991):

1) Most, if not all, students actively participated in the practice with role playing, making the classroom more cheerful and Oriental.

2) Students spent more time out of class practicing both individually and in small group to prepare the presentation.

3) Students' language improvement was more evident in vocabulary, grammar, phonetics and, what was more significant,

they were more willing and bold to speak in Chinese, both in and out of the classroom. At the first presentation as oral exam, most students had their skits written down and held it, ready to look at, some just read it. Later, most students acted without looking at scripts.

4) Role playing helped maintain students' interest to continue with the program. Of the 13 students in Chinese 1101, 10 continued with Chinese 1102. These students said the course had been enjoyable and oral Chinese turned out to be not that hard, so they wanted to learn more. Chinese 1102 had 12 students. The group was still small, but 10 out of 13 students had retained. In the previous year (1990-1991), there were 6 students in Chinese 1101; only half of them continued with Chinese 1102.

5) Role playing developed students' creativity. Students created a lot of real life situations for their oral exam skits, and tried to imitate the Chinese in speaking and behavior.

6) Role playing facilitated relationships among students. The group projects provided them with opportunities to work together and help each other.

Feedback From Students

An attitude survey was conducted in Chinese 1102. Among the 12 students, 11 students said they liked role playing both as a learning approach and as oral examination. They wrote:

-- It gives the opportunity to simulate a real life situation, and enables students to practice as closely to the real world as possible. It seems to help in learning the language.

-- It is fun and it allows you to work together with your friends instead of by yourself. You learn more from putting the project together than in studying at the last minute.

-- It (role playing as oral exam) is not as difficult as a written exam, and it allows the students to perform what they have learned. It also lets you be creative and come up with different skits.

-- It forces you to present your oral skills in a live setting, which can be challenging, but very motivational. It is an effective testing and learning method. A real advantage is that the student gets to design the dialogue as well as repeat it.

-- It forces you to think under pressure. It forces you to listen carefully. It enables the student to speak a language in front of his or her peers, and shows his/her ability.

Only one student did not like role playing. She wrote:

-- It is humiliation. I do not believe in public embarrassment as a way of learning anything. It should not be used as a teaching tool.

Even if this student "hated" role playing, she was one of the high achievers in the class and helped others in preparing the presentation.

Summary

Listening and speaking are the primary training for beginners of a foreign language, and language competence is built up through practice. Role playing can be applied in foreign language teaching because it creates simulative and enjoyable learning environment, and enhances students' confidence. In addition, it facilitates students' cognitive processes. When students role play subject matters, they have the opportunities to repeat the practice and make improvement. The final performances lay deep impressions on them, storing the information into their long-term memory. It seems to be more beneficial for beginners in foreign language acquisition since it is an oral training approach.

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